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News

7-year search for Bogota woman yields a law

Thursday, March 20, 2008 Last Updated Thursday March 20, 2008, EDT 5:55 AM

BY JASON TSAI

STAFF WRITER



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Police must accept — without delay — any report of a missing person and immediately jot down identifying information about the individual, under a measure signed Wednesday by Governor Corzine at Bogota Borough Hall.

"Patricia's Law," named for a woman who remains missing after leaving her Bogota home in 2001, ensures that police cannot refuse to accept such reports and must notify the missing person's family of support services.

Another initiative announced Wednesday will have police and medical examiner's offices comparing DNA samples of the state's roughly 1,500 missing persons with those of 272 unidentified bodies, authorities said.

The initiatives come seven years after 42-year-old Patricia M. Viola was reported missing after

leaving her Chestnut Avenue home.

Her husband, Jim, has continued his tireless search for her and in recent years pushed for legislation to require police to act immediately on all missing person's cases.

Patricia's Law was unanimously approved by the Legislature in January and will take effect in a few months, authorities said. The law was modeled after measures adopted by three other states.

"I want to thank Jim and his family for all the efforts that they've put together to take a tragedy and turn it into a greater opportunity for our broader society," Corzine said before a packed audience at council chambers.

New Jersey and nearly all other states have historically lacked procedures for handling missing person's cases. In recent years, Oregon, Indiana and Connecticut have adopted legislation similar to Patricia's Law, authorities said.

"They say the first 24 hours are the only 24 hours," said Assemblyman Gordon Johnson, D-Englewood, a former Bergen County undersheriff.

Under Patricia's Law, police cannot refuse to take on the case of a missing person — whether child or adult — on any basis, including if circumstances do not indicate foul play or if it appears the person disappeared voluntarily.

Police must then take down more than two dozen pieces of information, from the person's name to the address of his or her dentist. If the person remains missing after 30 days, police must attempt to gather DNA samples as well.

Families should also be notified of available services, such as those provided by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

"They don't give you a book of what to do; there isn't a flier of what to do," Viola said prior to the noontime news conference.

Viola said the measures announced Wednesday might have helped in the initial hours of the investigation into his wife's disappearance on Feb. 13, 2001, but he stopped short of blaming anyone for her continued absence.

The Honeywell International engineer said he is "very proud" of the new measures, including an initiative also announced Wednesday by state Attorney General Anne Milgram that aims to support Patricia's Law.

The DNA Identification Project will attempt to cross-match DNA gleaned from the state's missing persons with DNA from the state's unidentified remains, Milgram said.

To do that, authorities must begin exhuming bodies.

"New Jersey will be the first in the country to implement and coordinate this national model," she said.

The success of that program, however, is contingent on other states coming onboard, authorities said.

"There are missing persons who will be taken from New Jersey and found in other states, and there will be individuals who are found in other states who were from the state of New Jersey," Milgram said.

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On Wednesday, dressed in a dark suit and pinstriped dress shirt, Viola's voice came haltingly as he spoke about his wife. He wore a button on his lapel, as always, with a picture of her. His 1-year-old grandson babbled in the background.

"I felt that change was truly needed," he said. "I had to go forward with it, full force."

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